

## They Are We. by Genevie

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**Summary:**

Years ago, Hopper looked at her like she was all he wanted, all he needed. It was an embarrassing kind of look; it was an exciting kind of look. He didn't use words like skittish or crazy to describe her, not ever. She was just *his*, until she wasn't anymore, and then she was Joyce.

## They Are We.

It's Lonnie's decision to end the marriage.

He says it's because Joyce isn't available to him; that the boys take up too much of one half of her, and her job takes up too much of the other half, and all he's left with is a bunch of scraps, like the gristly meat they shove off on the dog. "I deserve better," he says, and because he has spent their entire marriage breaking off tiny little pieces of her and using them to build himself up, she thinks that maybe he's right. Maybe she's let him down in inexcusable ways.

They call the divorce amicable even when their voices are raw from screaming at each other, and their hands shake with the adrenaline of hatred, and they can stand no person less than they can stand each other. People seem to respect that word, *amicable*, and Joyce comes to like the feel of it on her tongue. "Oh no, we're not bringing in any lawyers," she'll say, "It's all very amicable." Which is only true because Lonnie doesn't want the house, the children, the dog. He just wants out.

"Do you deserve better than your sons, too?" she asks him one night, and Lonnie can't even meet her eyes, the bastard.

"They're your kids," he says. "I wouldn't've raised them like this."

Being a single mother is a struggle. Being stuck in a dead-end job is a struggle. Knowing that people are talking about her like she's the goddamned Titanic, taking on water from the hole Lonnie left in her life is a struggle. She expects that adapting to life without Lonnie will be a struggle, too, but she comes to realise that him being gone is like a cloud uncovering the sun—that the reason why she only had scraps to give him was because he didn't leave her with anything else.

It's Joyce's decision to never look back on their marriage with fondness.



When she's young, adults call her skittish, as though she's a stray

kitten and her nervousness is something cute she'll grow out of once she realises how silly she seems to everyone else. As a teen, she's high-strung, brooding. Typical, they say. All teenagers are emotional. Later, Lonnie calls her crazy. Hysterical when he really wants the upper hand.

Now, her anxiety is its own entity, something that she has and not something which she is. An illness. A disorder. She ignores it the way she ignores any other sickness, but it is not the cold, not the flu. Its presence sneaks up on her and asserts itself in demanding ways. Her throat tightens and her heart pounds itself tachycardic and she fumbles into a cycle where the more she thinks about something, the more it hurts, and the more it hurts, the more it's on her mind.

She suffocates in open air. People see her, sometimes, with wild eyes and insatiable lungs and they think, *that's just Joyce being Joyce*. And because she is so good at maintaining a state of constant forwards motion, nobody stops to help her breathe.



Money is tight. It leashes her to the store, holding her there for longer than her usual eight hour shifts. It taunts her with every drip of the bathroom faucet, with every tear in her sons' clothes, with every rattle the refrigerator makes.

She slips outside one night wearing pyjamas too thin for the weather and tries to focus on her budget, performing calculations in the air with her fingers, dancing them across the blackened sky. She looks at the forest and tries not to think about how withdrawn Jonathan's becoming. She looks at the shed and tries not to worry about Will's struggles to fit in at school. She closes her eyes and she tries not to think about how she isn't there enough for either son because working reasonable hours doesn't earn her enough money to cover everything that needs to be covered and it never will, will it? She'll always live paycheque to paycheque, always spend too much time working and too little time with her boys.

Her hands fall to her face. She feels like she can't breathe again, like she can't support her own weight. She slides down the wall, not even bracing herself as she hits the porch. The impact barely registers.

“Mom?”

She flinches.

“What are you doing out here? It's freezing.”

She holds the flinch, stiff.

“Mom. What is it? What's wrong?”

“Everything's fine, Jonathan. Go back to bed.”

She hears him move towards her, his slippers a gentle scratch against the porch. When he's in front of her, she looks away, ashamed, and he holds out his hands for her. “Everything will be just as fine inside,” he says, and because she can't come up with an excuse as to why she needs to be right here, right now, she lets him help her up on her feet and into the house. They walk together to the couch and she sits down, bent over, elbows on her knees, forehead on her fingertips.

He takes his seat beside her and wraps an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. *What a good boy he is*, she thinks, *I shouldn't let him see me like this*. It's been so long since she was last held, though, since she felt like anything other than an anchor, solitary, half-embedded beneath oceanic responsibilities. She can't help but lean into his embrace, letting his heartbeat play in her ear like a lullaby.

This is her son, someone who she gave life to, someone who she somehow managed to raise into a kind and considerate young man with a heart so big it makes her own swell. Everything is not fine, but this one thing—this one wonderful human being—is enough to make her believe that she can keep powering through.

The next morning, Jonathan is knocking on their neighbours' doors, offering to do small jobs for small fees, and she spends her entire shift at work trying to hold herself together with tape and glue.



Years ago, Hopper looked at her like she was all he wanted, all he needed. It was an embarrassing kind of look; it was an exciting kind

of look. He didn't use words like skittish or crazy to describe her, not ever. She was just *his*, until she wasn't anymore, and then she was Joyce.

Now he looks at her like she's made of porcelain and there are bone-deep cracks running all across her skin. She can barely stand to face him for that look, but she does anyway because she needs him to realise that she's right—that Will is alive. Instead, he speaks to her about his own grief in a voice so low and gravelly and kind that it's like a purr. It gives off a radiant warmth that she almost softens into but she can't, not when he's using that voice to try to convince her that her boy is dead.

"I need you to believe me," she begs. "Please. *Please*."

There's more she needs from him that that, of course. She needs his help finding Will, needs him to stay with her, needs him to look at her like she isn't unravelling in front of him in a mess of long, knotted strands. Those things, she thinks, will all come naturally if he'll just believe her.

He doesn't and that scares her. She wants to fight him with everything she has left until her voice is raw and her tears are dry and he finally understands the difference between having a conviction and succumbing to grief, but she knows that there's nothing she can do. If Hopper had it in him to believe her, then he would.

When he gets up to leave, she lets him even though she thinks it means that she is alone in believing that Will can be saved. But it doesn't mean that. He doesn't stay away like everyone else does, clinging to his doubt like it's the lone buoy keeping him afloat in inexplicably deep water. He comes back.

*Will's body was a fake*, he says. *You were right*, he says. He leans forward and the concern and the pity and the slow, raking assessments of her sanity are gone, and she knows that he's seeing her again, just her, nothing else.

The moment she learned that Will was missing, she knew that he was alive, but it's only now that she's certain they'll be able to bring him

home.



"You okay?" Hopper asks, halfway through the ride back from meeting with Terry Ives. "If you're worried about Jonathan..."

"I'm not. I mean, I am, of course I am, but I can't stop thinking about that woman back there."

"Who, Terry?"

"Nobody believed her. She was right, but..." The rest of Joyce's words collapse into a sigh between her lips. This isn't the kind of conversation she wants to have, where they just repeat facts to each other and act as if their circumstances are different than Terry's were, safer somehow, better. "If you didn't believe me, Hop, then..."

"Joyce. You're nothing like Terry Ives."

"I am, though. And I don't need to be told that I'm not, that's not what I'm after here. It's just—I just. Thank you. For at least being open to other possibilities."

"I was just following the trail."

"Like nobody did for Terry."

"We're going to find her daughter, too," he says, and even though he's skirting around what Joyce is saying, she likes the sound of that *we*. He's not going try to sideline her. He wants them to be in this together.

"You're a good man, Hopper."

This time, she doesn't miss the smile barely lifting his lips.



They are We when they find the girl, when they support her through her trip to the upside-down. They're We when they break into the Hawkins laboratory, and they continue being We as they undergo

interrogation in separate rooms. They're We in their hazmat suits, We in the upside-down.

When they find Will, pale and breathless, held to the wall in a web of mucous, a slug buried several feet deep into his tiny body, they are more We than ever, and when they bring him back to life they finally become Three, sitting together on the filthy ground, breathing in the toxic air, Joyce crumpled over Will, Hopper crumpled over Joyce.

"We need to get out of here," Hopper says when he finds his voice again. Joyce still doesn't have hers. She nods, half sobbing, half laughing, wholly engrossed in the steady rise and fall of Will's chest. For the entire walk back into the upside-right, she does not let go of Will's arm as Hopper carries him, does not release her hold on Hopper's elbow.

At the hospital, they sit together in the waiting room, Joyce and Hopper do, her arms wrapped around herself, his hand resting just above her knee. "Will's in good hands," he says, but because he's not in Joyce's hands worry curls her toes. Anything can go wrong, everything can go wrong. She needs him here. She needs to know how he is doing in precise terms, needs to see his wellness for herself.

Hopper shifts in his seat so that he's facing her better. "Can I get you anything? A cup of coffee? When's the last time you ate? I'll grab something from the vending machine."

"No, stay. Please. At least until I can see Will again."

"Okay," he says, and she lets him pull her closer. He rests his chin on the top of her head like he used to when they were young and she was even shorter than she is now. *He's still too good* she thinks. It's why she broke away from him all those years ago. With how much he meant to her and how much she stood to lose if she lost him, being in love with him was more terrifying to her than being alone. Things were different with Lonnie—love was different with him. Even when she cared for him in deep, urgent ways, she knew that she would be okay without him, that his love was something she could survive losing.

She doesn't know how she feels now, but Hopper's arm is warm

around her shoulders, and his fingers are soft on her arm, and all that matters is the simple comfort radiating through him and into her. It isn't enough to calm her nerves or to stem the flow of horrible possibilities coursing through her mind, but it is enough, in its small way, to make the wait a little bit more bearable.



She doesn't want to be home alone.

Will is at the hospital. Jonathan is there with him. *Go home, mom, they had insisted, together. Take a shower, go sleep in your own bed, whatever, we'll be fine here. We've got each other.*

What they neglect to realise is that having each other means that nobody has her; that she's maintaining a persistent presence at the hospital because being anywhere else fills her with the crippling feeling that something will happen to Will while she isn't there to keep him safe.

At first she refuses. Then they call in reinforcements. And now she's sitting in the passenger's seat of Hopper's car, nursing a cigarette and trying not to think about how far away her house is from the hospital.

"You all right?" he asks her not two minutes into the drive, and she shrugs and says that she's fine, that she's just tired, that she doesn't want to talk. They're both silent for the rest of the ride.

The house is mostly clean now. Will's friends, and the Wheelers, and Steve, and Hopper himself had volunteered to help and Jonathan accepted before Joyce could decline. The wallpaper is still peeling in places, and her alphabet is still stark black against the light-coloured wall, and the boards are still nailed up over the hole, but the lights are down and the hallway has been cleaned, and everything is more organised than she remembers it ever being, which is nice, she supposes, in the distant way that a neighbour's garden is nice. It isn't her work, so it's hard to feel good about it; it isn't home without Will, without Jonathan, so it doesn't feel right.

"Do you want me to stay?" Hopper asks, and though she thinks to



shake her head, no, she's nodding instead.

He gets her something to drink to help her fight the losing battle she's waging against her nerves, and he cuts her off before she has too much. He helps her into bed, turning away while she puts on her pyjamas; he stays beside her, warm and quiet and solid, until she falls asleep.

The next morning she finds him sleeping on the couch, still half-dressed in his uniform, and she thinks, *this is nice*. Nobody called overnight so Will must be fine, and Jonathan must be fine, and Hopper is fine, and maybe it won't be long before she starts to feel fine, too.



Hopper shows up at her door several Sundays later looking equal parts sheepish and ashamed, and he asks, without even saying hello, "You don't happen to have any Eggos, do you?"

She wonders if he's drunk. Topsy, at least, since there's no red flush to his face, no slurring of his words. "Hopper, what?"

"It's... urgent."

"You have an urgent need for frozen waffles?"

"Look, do you have any or not?"

"We're fresh out of emergency waffles."

"How about a key to the store? Everything's closed."

"Oh yeah, sure, I love breaking and entering."

Something darkens across his eyes like an eclipse. When it's gone, so is the sheepishness. "Joyce, I'm being serious here."

"I have a key," she says, tentatively. "Let me just grab it and tell the boys where I'm going."

They go to the store; they get the waffles. They don't pay because

that will look more suspicious than a single box of Eggos missing from the freezer. Joyce says she'll ring it up during her next shift and Hopper hands her enough cash to cover the cost. She holds onto the box until they're outside, and she continues holding it even after Hopper reaches out to take it from her.

"What's going on, Hop?"

"They're for Eleven," he says, spurting out the words as though he's losing the nerve to speak them. "I ran out this afternoon and forgot to pick up another box. Didn't want her to go without dinner. I would have said something back at the house but I want to keep this between us for now. And I'm not sure if I've still got ears on me or not, so," he nods his head at the car, points a thumb towards the store, "that's why I'm just telling you now."

"They're for Eleven?" she repeats. It's such a simple statement, yet it swirls around her like a cyclone comprised of questions which have no immediate answers. She feels like she did when Will first reached out through the lights; protective, prepared to do whatever it takes to bring that little girl back. "Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Is she here?"

"I don't know."

"Is she in the upside-down?"

"Joyce, I don't know."

"She helped us find Will," she says, and Hopper nods.

"Remember what we said when we were coming back from Terry Ives' place? *We're going to find her daughter, too.* It's time to start looking again."



It's warm for January; still chilly, but bearable. Joyce has the day off and Hopper has the day off, so they take a few boxes of waffles with

them to the box in the forest, and they try to track Eleven based on how quickly the waffles disappear and how frequently she comes by to take more. Ultimately, they had hoped to find ways to measure her presence—a crackle of static in the air, maybe, or the mildew smell of the upside-down, or a glitch in the compass Hopper keeps on top of the box—but Eleven comes and goes as quietly as still air.

They add a notebook and some pencil crayons to the box—Joyce's idea—hoping that she'll try to communicate with them, but she doesn't.

“Does she know that you're you and not someone from State?” Joyce asks late into the process, as Hopper's checking the box again to see if the waffles are gone.

“Not unless she can see us.”

“I have an idea. Can you hand me the paper and a pencil?”

When he does, she writes down,

*We're coming for you, sweetheart. Just stay safe and we'll be there as soon as we figure out how.*

*Remember, you're so brave and so strong that you can do anything you put your mind to.*

*- Joyce and Hopper*

Then, after a small amount of rummaging, she pulls her wallet from her purse and takes out a photo of Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin crammed together into Castle Byers, each boy smiling. “I want her to have something nice,” she says as she hands it all to Hopper.

“It's a good idea,” he says, putting everything in the box, closing its lid. “I hope it helps.”

They sit together, silent. Joyce has to hold herself back from constantly checking the box; has to force herself to be patient, to not let worry overtake her. They've built a strange kind of peacefulness around themselves here in the forest. Joyce is used to the storm, to feeling like lightning is coursing through her nerves and thunder is

screaming across her mind. Getting to experience the calm before the next one isn't something she wants to take for granted.

"You hungry?" Hopper asks, eventually, as he reaches for an unopened box of Eggos.

"Aren't those for Eleven?"

"I brought an extra box. Figured it was easier than making sandwiches."

"Well, thank you," she says, her smile shining through. "But I'm going to wait until I can get some real food."

"Hey, if they're good enough for Eleven," he says, his mouth already half-full of waffle.

Joyce looks at her watch. Fifteen minutes left before she can stop fretting over the box and open the damned thing already. She wishes they'd settled on a shorter range of time than a half an hour. Ten minutes, maybe. Or five. But Hopper had made a good point about how they don't know what'll happen if they open the box at the same time as Eleven does. *It'll be safer to check it less frequently*, he'd said. *Not for us, we should be fine on this end, but for Eleven.*

"You sure you don't want one of these waffles?" he asks, a teasing lilt to his voice. There are tiny crumbs in his beard and without thinking, she reaches up to brush them away. His scruff tickles her skin and her fingers graze his lips, causing their own tickle. When she pulls away, his tongue slips out as though he's tasting for the last traces of her touch. She feels her blood begin to rush, warm despite the cold, and she drags her own lip between her teeth.

"Joyce," he says, his voice equal parts longing and warning. She knows how he's feeling so well that it aches. There's nothing more terrifying to her, in this moment, than how much she wants Hopper, who's as good to her as the sun is to the day, as the stars are to the night. It's an exciting kind of terror, though; energising, invigorating. She leans into him and he meets her halfway, cursing into her mouth. His hands grasp at her hair, tight, building up a good kind of pain, and his kiss is ravenous and hungry and needy in ways which hers

isn't. *I'm driving him to this*, she thinks, and she scoots closer, wanting to give him as much of her warmth, as much of her touch, as much of herself as she possibly can.

One of his hands travels down her neck, along her collar bone, past the space between her breasts. It dips below her waistband and slides, smoothly, beneath her panties, and she can hardly believe that she's letting this happen, that she wants this to happen. His hands are cold from the winter but she doesn't care because his caresses are heat itself and they flare across her entire body.

The kiss becomes messy, wild, with neither one of them focusing on it, yet with neither one of them wanting to pull away, either. His fingers pump inside of her, and his heart beats fast beneath her palm, and she throbs against the gentle swirl of his thumb, and the rhythm of it all makes her feel good, so good that it's too much for her to bear alone.

She moves her hand to his zipper. "We need to get you..."

He moves it away. "You'll get me later," he says, and she likes the sound of that *later*, all throaty and breathy, cocky in the way it promises that there'll be a later, that they will come together like this again.

They continue until she can't continue any longer and she's convulsing in his arms, panting and sweating and clinging to him while she rides out the last waves of her orgasm. "Yep, I've still got it," he says, and she buries her face in his jacket, laughing, feeling silly and young and wanted again.

He leaves to get some napkins from the car. When he's back, she ducks away to clean herself off; when she's done, she finds him preparing to open the box.

"Is the picture still there?" she asks, suddenly nervous again.

"It's gone," he says. Then: "She left us something."

He holds up a drawing of five stick figure children; four boys and a girl in a pink dress. Written on the top is, *To: Mike, From: El. Joyce*

starts crying but they're good tears, optimistic and hopeful. Eleven is somewhere still within their reach.

"We're going to find her, Joyce. We'll bring her back."

He says *we* so naturally that it reminds her what it's supposed to mean to have a partner. Lonnie's *we* was always like the royal *we*; an *I* in disguise, a cloaked statement of inequality, but Hopper means his—really means it. "You're a good man, Hop," she says again, and when he reaches up to wipe away her tears she takes his hand and just holds onto it.

She hopes that she has it in her this time to not let go, no matter what.